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The Office and Work of a Minister of Christ.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

Ordination of Rev. Jere W. Smith,

OVER THE

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND SOCIETY

IN DURHAM CENTRE,

AUGUST 18, 1858.

BY DAVID SMITH, D.D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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Fifty-nine years ago, this very week, I was ordained a minister of the gospel over the Church and Congregation in this town, there being no other society or denomination of Christians here at that time. O, how changed! Not one of this Consociation then living now remains on earth! They have gone to receive their reward. In my ninety-first year I seem to stand alone, like a shriveled oak in a young forest. And the earnest solicitations of the pastor elect, that I should perform the duty now assigned me, is my only apology for attempting to address you from the word of God on this occasion.

S E R M O N .

“FOR WE ARE LABORERS TOGETHER WITH GOD.”—I. COR. III. 9.

The apostle commences this chapter with some kind reproof and admonition. He warns the Corinthian church against that partial, unreasonable and contentious attachment, which they manifested towards their favorite apostles and teachers, and which greatly disturbed their peace and harmony. “For,” saith the apostle, “while one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal? Who is Paul? and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but *God* gave the increase. So then, neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but *God* who giveth the increase.”

The astonishing success with which the preaching of the apostles was attended at Corinth, excited in their respective converts too high an estimation of their power and importance. They did not consider that those apostles were but mere instruments to accomplish the divine purpose; but they were disposed to ascribe to them the *work*, and give them the *honor*, which belongs only to God. Paul, therefore, viewed it necessary to administer that reproof which we find in the context, and to teach them the true rank and importance which were appropriate to himself and his brethren in the ministry, in the great and precious work that had been ac-

complished among them. He taught them to view and honor *God* as the *first cause*, the great *efficient* in this work. And for himself and fellow-laborers he claimed nothing higher than to be voluntary and active instruments. Such are the most faithful ministers of Christ. They are mere ram's horns, and have no more efficiency in *themselves*, in renewing the hearts of sinners, than those instruments had in demolishing the walls of Jericho. Yet, the apostle affirms, "*We are laborers together with God.*"

It is highly important that the rank and employment of the ministers of Christ should be well understood, and suitably estimated, both by themselves, and by the people to whom they minister. That their persons and office may not be over-valued, as seems to have been the case at Corinth, it should ever be kept in mind, that they are no more than feeble *instruments*, and of *no* avail, without divine co-operation. But as *instruments*, no other, most probably, hold a higher place in promoting the glory of God, and the good of their fellow-men, than they, who, in the text, are styled *laborers together with God*.

To illustrate the text, I will endeavor,

I. Briefly to describe the *work*, in the exercise of which the ministers of the gospel are *laborers together with God*. And,

II. Show what is implied in this; or what is necessary to deserve this character.

I. I am to describe the *work*, in the exercise of which the ministers of the gospel are *laborers together with God*.

This is nothing less than the great work of promoting the divine glory, and the salvation of fallen-men. It is that work about which God has been employed from the commencement of time. Indeed, it was commenced in the councils of eternity. To the progress and accomplishment of this work, God has subordinated every creature and every

event. Even his enemies, though they mean not so, have been made to subserve this great and glorious object. The wrath of man shall be made to praise him.

A comprehensive view of this work would embrace the whole system of divine government in this world. It was in reference to this great design that this world was created ; that the promise of a Savior was made to our first parents ; that a church has been established and preserved ; that patriarchs and prophets have been raised up, and qualified for their office ; that the Jewish nation was selected from the rest of the world, furnished with various ordinances, and specially favored with the peculiar presence and protection of the *Most High*. It was to carry on and accomplish this great and glorious work, that the Lord Jesus became incarnate, obeyed the divine law, preached his gospel, wrought miracles, suffered, and bled, and died, and rose again ; thus making atonement for sin, and preparing a way for the consistent exercise of mercy and grace to the guilty and ill-deserving.

The inspiration of the apostles, their preaching and miracles, and the convicting, renovating, sanctifying, and comforting influences of the Holy Spirit, which accompanied and followed their labors, were all parts of the same great and benevolent work.

This work, as it now exists, and is carried on in the world, consists in bringing mankind to a knowledge of the truth, to the exercise of repentance and faith in the blood of Christ, to reformation and holiness of heart and life, to joy and peace in the exercise of faith, and finally, to be meet partakers of the heavenly inheritance. Such is the work in the execution of which the ministers of the gospel are to be *laborers together with God*. It is a work in which the divine glory and the highest advancement of human happiness are inseparably connected. It therefore demands the

respect, the encouragement and the support of all who would share the rich inheritance purchased by Christ.

II. We are to consider in what respects ministers of the gospel are laborers with God in this important work, and what is implied as necessary to their deserving this character.

Here I will first observe, that ministers of the gospel are not laborers together with God in *all* parts of this work. They have nothing to do in devising any part of the plan, or the proper means of salvation. All this is wholly the result of the unsearchable counsels of God. "Who hath known the mind of the Lord? and who hath been his counselor? For *of him*, and *through him*, and *to him* are all things." The great plan of redemption is infinitely above the counsels, or conceptions of men, or of angels. It is worthy only of the infinite Jehovah.

Neither are ministers, in any respect, *independently*, or *efficiently* workers with God. All their qualifications for the work, and all their strength to perform it, are derived wholly from *Him*; and they are continued and supported by the same power and grace. This the apostle asserts in his second epistle to the Corinthians. (iii. 5.) "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to *think* anything of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament." Also in the context, (vs. 5.) "Who, then, is Paul, and who is Apollos, but *ministers* by whom ye believed, even as God gave to every man?" All that ministers are able to do towards the salvation of their fellow-men, if not accompanied by divine grace and efficiency, would be of no avail. After all their planting and watering, their preaching and praying, no increase would ever be produced without the *special agency* of God. Ministers are not therefore independent, or efficient agents in the work. God gives and sustains the

powers they exert, and produces the effect. The efficiency of their labors for the salvation of sinners and the glory of God depends wholly on divine co-operation and grace. “*God giveth the increase.*”

But ministers are laborers together with God, as *dependent*, yet free and voluntary instruments. As such, they use exertions which are essentially requisite, not only to their own salvation, but also to that of their fellow men. Though they have no part, or agency, in devising the plan of salvation, or in making atonement, yet in making application of this, God has appointed them to bear a conspicuous part. A constitution is established, according to which their agency is, usually, of essential importance. It was so in the primitive ages of the church.

In revealing to mankind the plan of salvation, and the doctrines and duties necessary to be known, in performing miracles in attestation to the truth of what they taught, and the divine authority under which they acted, and in persuading men to believe and obey, men, as *instruments*, were highly important, because their office, as prophets and apostles, were derived from Christ.

Since the completion of the sacred volume, the necessity of immediate inspiration and miraculous gifts has ceased. But, in other respects, ministers have still the same arduous work to perform. They may still say: “Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.” To them, though earthen vessels, is committed the gospel of reconciliation, that they may publish, explain, and enforce its *doctrines* and *duties*. They are ambassadors appointed for the express purpose of treating with rebels against God concerning their return to obedient submission to their sovereign Lord, their heavenly King. Thus they are, in a very important sense, laborers together with God,

in accomplishing the salvation of fallen man. Though they cannot of themselves effect this great and glorious object, yet they do *that* which, according to the common course of divine government, God has rendered highly important and necessary.

But it is worthy of remark, that not every one who assumes the name and profession of a gospel minister, is deserving of the character of a laborer with God in the sense of the text. Some are in name and profession what they are not in reality. It may therefore be proper to point out in a few particulars, what are necessary qualifications in ministers of the gospel, that they may be truly *laborers together with God*.

1st. They ought to be suitably qualified for the work, and regularly called to it. God has told us, with sufficient plainness, what are the qualifications necessary for the sacred office, and the manner in which it ought to be commenced. A thorough knowledge of the doctrines and precepts of the gospel, soundness in the faith, aptness to teach, a fair and reputable character, with purity and integrity of heart and life, are repeatedly enjoined as pre-requisites for a call to the ministerial work.

The proper manner of introduction to his work is, by the approbation and recommendation of those who have been previously employed and regularly inducted into the same. When, therefore, men who are ignorant of the great truths of the gospel, or unsound in the faith ; who are incapable of teaching, or of ill-report ; who are insincere in heart, and immoral in life ; and have not the approbation of any regular and faithful ministers of Christ, *do*, from a presumptuous self-sufficient spirit, undertake to preach the gospel, they are so far from being *laborers together with God*, for the salvation of sinners, that they give evidence of being laborers with the great adversary in leading souls

to destruction. As such, they should be discountenanced and avoided by all who would shun the snares of the arch-seducer.

2. To sustain the character of *laborers together with God*, ministers must pursue the work agreeable to divine direction. They have their path clearly delineated, and the means to be employed particularly described. To be *laborers together with God* in saving the souls of men, they must walk in the way, and use the means which he has appointed. The *Bible* must be their pole-star, their counselor and guide. Its *doctrines* and *precepts* must be faithfully explained and enforced, and all its interesting and persuasive motives clearly exhibited. They must faithfully administer, to proper subjects; the divine ordinances, and be active and engaged in every way conformable to divine direction. God is, indeed, the wise Master-Builder who has devised the plan, laid the foundation, and given to his servants their direction; and they can aid the work, and become laborers with Him, only by a strict conformity to his rules, and the appointed means of execution. The divine direction to *Moses* is applicable to all who are builders in God's spiritual temple. "See thou do all things after the pattern showed thee in the mount."

3. To deserve the character of *laborers together with God*, ministers must be actuated by the same disposition in regard to the same object. God, in all he is doing for the salvation of fallen man, possesses an infinitely tender and compassionate love for their souls, with a view to his *own glory*. Of all things in the universe, the glory of God is the most important; and is, in his own mind, and ought to be in the minds of all his rational creatures, the supreme object of regard. Accordingly, God says, in regard to his church: "This people I have formed for *myself*; they shall show forth my praise." (Isa. xliii, 21.)

The motive for performing his most important works, he thus declares to be, "*For my great name's sake.*" This, instead of interfering *with*, does actually *imply* a most tender and compassionate regard for the souls of men. For the happiness of those who are renewed by divine grace, consists, essentially, in beholding the divine glory displayed, and God's kingdom advanced. The same disposition and views ought to possess the minds of Christ's ministers. The same sincere and compassionate love for the souls of men, and the same supreme and ultimate regard for the glory of God, should be their governing motive. This will render them, in the fullest sense, *laborers together with God* in the great work of man's salvation.

The subject suggests the following *remarks* :

1. We hence learn the character of a regular and faithful minister of Jesus Christ. It is still the case with the ministers of the gospel, as it anciently was with the priests among the people of God. The apostle says: "No man desireth this honor to himself but he that was called of God, as was *Aaron*." A regular and faithful minister, will not *run before he is sent*, nor "prophecy before he is spoken to." He cautiously examines, that he may know the will of God. He examines himself in regard to his own disposition, motives, and qualifications for the work, and cheerfully submits himself to the examination and judgment of those whom God has appointed to superintend the concerns of his church.

Desiring to be a shepherd in Christ's fold, he is willing to enter the door which he has opened, knowing that they who climb up some other way, are thieves and robbers, whom God will reject. A true servant of Christ will cheerfully conform to all the regulations of his house. He comes to his fellow men, not in his own name, but in the name of Jehovah, who has called him to be his embas-

sador. He addresses to his fellow sinners, not his own words, not the doctrines and precepts of human invention, or vain philosophy ; not smooth things, which gratify the carnal heart ; but the pure and holy messages of him by whom he is sent. These are the messages of gospel truth, the doctrines of sovereign grace, which are according to godliness. He preaches the preaching that God bids him, declaring no doctrines but what may be accompanied with, “ *Thus saith the Lord.*” He engages in the work, not from selfish motives, not to please men, and obtain worldly honors, or distinctions ; not for filthy lucre, merely, or any temporal advantage whatever ; but from a tender regard for the souls of men, and a supreme regard for the glory of God. He is actuated, in some good degree, by the same spirit which was in Christ, who, when he was rich, for our sakes became poor. He has a heart to spend and be spent in the service of his divine master, and for the salvation of souls, ready to perish. Such is the true character of one, who is a faithful laborer together with God, or a regular and faithful minister of Jesus Christ.

It is a melancholy fact, that there ever have been those who have assumed this sacred office, and have spoken in the name of Christ, who were undeserving the character, which has been described as constituting a faithful minister of the gospel. To such, he will say, “ I never knew you,” as my servants, “ Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity.”

2. We are taught from the subject, that ministers of the gospel are called to a most *solemn, important, and honorable* work. They are laborers with God in that work, on which he has, from the beginning, set his heart ; and in the execution of which, he is continually seeking his own glory and the highest happiness of the redeemed.

What employment can be more *desirable*, more *important*, and more *honorable*, than that on which Jehovah him-

self places so high a value, as calculated to advance the divine glory, and promote the happiness of his rational creatures? Surely, he that desires the office of a bishop, desires a good work, though he is but an instrument in the divine hand.

3. Faithful ministers are justly entitled to the aid and support, the esteem and patronage of those among whom they labor. None can doubt this, who believe their *work*, their *station*, and their *character* to be such as the text and subject describe them. They labor by day and by night. How often does the midnight lamp witness their anxiety, their intense desire, and their earnest supplications, for the spiritual good of their people! Often when the minds of their people are locked in sleep, *they* are before the mercy-seat pleading for them.

It will readily be admitted, that it is an imperious duty to support the cause of God—to promote that work, to which *he* has attached so much importance, and for the accomplishment of which he has been doing wonders from the beginning—yes, has given his beloved son, as an atoning sacrifice! Can any, then, consistently withhold their aid and encouragement from those whom God has commissioned to be laborers together with him, and to speak in his name? Ought they not to esteem, love, and patronize those, who profess by their office, and evince by their conduct, that they love the souls of men, and labor for their salvation? Is there not great propriety in the apostle's exhortation: "And we exhort you, brethren, to know them who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and esteem them very highly for their work's sake." Though they are, *personally*, entitled to no more esteem than others of the same qualifications, yet the dignity and importance of the office and work to which God has called them, justly entitle them, if they faithfully discharge their duty, to the peculiar aid, patronage and esteem of their people.

Would any inquire how this duty is to be performed ? It may readily be answered ; by attending on their ministry ; by believing and embracing the truths of the gospel ; by performing the duties they inculcate from the word of God ; by furnishing them a suitable support ; and by treating them with kindness, candor, affection and respect. And they should expressly assist them by their friendship and their prayers.

4. We are taught by this subject, that those who oppose faithful ministers in their work, do equally oppose God. If the work be such as the text and subject represent, those who fight against it, and against the instruments by which it is performed, must be viewed as fighting against God, in whose cause his faithful servants are engaged. Thus our Savior taught his disciples. He says ; “ He that receiveth “ you receiveth me ; and he that receiveth me receiveth him “ that sent me.” By the same rule, he that rejecteth the servants of Christ, rejecteth him also. Christ taught his disciples that their attachment to him and his cause would be the very reason why *they* should be hated and persecuted by those who oppose the truth. “ All these things,” he assures them, should be “ for his name’s sake.” God and his faithful ministers are embarked in the same important cause ; and as mankind treat the latter, so also they treat the former.

There are various ways in which people may oppose ministers in their *work*. It may be done by denying, opposing, and contradicting the truths they are commissioned to declare from the word of God ; by disregarding the precepts, exhortations and rebukes administered from the same source ; by indulging in themselves, and exciting in others, prejudice, and unfriendly feelings ; and by defaming their character, and destroying their influence. In these, and many other ways, people may oppose ministers in their work. In

doing thus, they oppose God, who says ; “ Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.”

5. Our subject affords ground of encouragement for the ministers of Christ, in their important and arduous work. Were they alone in a work of such magnitude, they might well be discouraged. The seed which they sow would produce no good fruit. Knowing the stupidity, moral blindness, and hardness of heart which characterize mankind ; and also their native opposition to the character and government of God ; resisting the most powerful and persuasive motives to renounce their rebellion and submit to Him, they may rationally conclude that, if left to themselves, they will labor in vain, and spend their strength for naught. They would feel assured that the dry bones to which they prophesy, would never revive and live. But they are not in this helpless condition. There is a power above them—a primary co-operating agent, who can cause the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and even dead and dry bones to come together and rejoice. They may, therefore, hope that their labor will not be in vain, but that the Lord will work by them confirming his word and making it quick and powerful. They have the greatest encouragement to pursue their work, trusting for success, not in human means, but in the power and grace of God.

Much animal feeling and excitement may be produced by human means and efforts ; and much zeal in religion may be excited, without any genuine conviction of sin, or any true submission to God. Whenever genuine conviction is produced, it is the *special* work of the Holy Spirit, even with the most efficacious means. “ It is the Spirit that quickeneth,” or makes spiritually alive.

Finally. If ministers of the gospel are *laborers together* with God, their people are bound to hear and regard their instructions. They come to their hearers in the name of Je-

hovah. They plead the cause of God their Savior. They tender to their fellow sinners the offers of mercy, and the terms of salvation. If therefore, their hearers disregard their message, they do it at their peril. The positive declaration of our Savior is ; “ He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not “ my word, hath one that judgeth him ; the word that I have “ spoken, the same shall judge him at the last day.” Listen, my hearers, to the voice of God. He speaks both from Sinai, and from Calvary ; and he will not speak in vain. Every declaration which he utters, if it do not prove a savor of life unto life, by being heard and obeyed, will prove a savor of death unto death. Obey then the word, and be wise unto salvation.

And now, beloved hearers, look into your own hearts, and ask yourselves, how you view and esteem the ministers of the gospel, and the doctrines of grace, which they are bound to proclaim ? Remember that ministers and people must, one day, meet before their omniscient Judge, to render an account how they have discharged their various personal and relative duties. Let the spirit of Christ dwell in you richly, and guide you in the way of truth, that you may be prepared to rejoice together at the marriage supper of the Lamb above. Be assured that the sacred truths now placed before you are highly important, and designed to promote the best good, both of ministers and people.

I might here say something of interest to our young brother, the pastor-elect, but I should encroach on the ground of him who is appointed to deliver the charge. I therefore forbear. But permit me to address a few words to this church and people, for whom I have ever felt a deep and thrilling interest. You have struggled hard to sustain the institutions of the gospel among you, and lay a foundation for the permanent settlement of a gospel minister ; and God has now crowned your efforts with success, in which I re-

joice with you. It has constantly been my heart's desire, and ardent prayer, that I might see you happily united in the selection of one to be ordained as your stated pastor—your spiritual guide, to declare to you the counsel of God. And through divine grace, I am permitted to see this interesting day. I am unable to express what I feel on this occasion. I will only say ; when any of you may pass my grave, remember that there lies a heart, which once beat with warm affection, and earnest desires both for your temporal and spiritual good.

